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Making it legal

Family additions celebrated on state Adoption Day

Dee Bourdon < >
Truth Staff

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Three Cass County families have a special reason to be thankful this holiday season.

Four children completed the legal process and were adopted by their foster parents, stepfather or grandmother.

These "parents" had nursed the children through colds, ear infections, scraped knees and just plain hurt feelings. They loved them, disciplined them and now have publicly proclaimed they are ready to accept the full, legal responsibility for them by giving them their names.



The three families appeared in Cass County Probate/Family Court on Tuesday morning to complete the adoption of three minor children and one adult. Even though she is still a student in high school but because she is older than age 17, one of the four adoptees is considered an adult in Michigan.

This year marks the first year Michigan has celebrated a statewide Adoption Day through family courts and the Family Independence Agency. Thirty-five counties participated, and more than 250 children were legally adopted across the state.

Ashley, an 18-year-old Dowagiac High School cheerleader, was legally adopted by her stepfather. He is the husband of Ashley's natural mother.

Bob, her stepdad, said: "This will be a good Thanksgiving season for us."

Autumn, 2, and Tommy, 18 months, though not related became the legal children of Chad and Jennifer of Niles. Jennifer said they have had Ashley for almost two years and Tommy for more than a year. They and their natural son, 8-year-old Eric, were in court for the adoptions and to celebrate with cake and pictures.

Jennifer said Autumn and Tommy were the first two foster children she and her husband took in, but they have two more right now.

"We've been waiting a long time," mom Jennifer said of this day. She said she and her husband volunteered to be foster parents about three years ago.

"I couldn't have asked for a better Christmas present. Our holidays are going to be so special this year," she said, smiling.



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Later in the morning, a Dowagiac grandmother adopted her 3-year-old grandson.

This will allow her to receive help, financial and other types, from agencies otherwise not available to her if she continued to act as the boy's guardian.

"We are making history here today," said James Nye, deputy director of state services for FIA of Lansing. "This is the first-ever statewide day for this, and over 250 kids statewide are being legally adopted today."

St. Joseph-Cass County FIA director Chris Kadulski said, "It's great to see the end of the process."

An emotional probate/family court Judge Susan Dobrich said, "We have a lot of sad things that happen in this courtroom, but this is one thing that makes it all worthwhile."

"It's (adoption) like putting water on a flower and watching it grow," she added.

Tami Phillips, FIA adoption specialist, said the kids in this system are mostly special- needs kids in terms of medical attention, or they suffered sexual and physical abuse before being taken out of their natural homes.

"They are finally getting a family to call their own with a loving environment," she added.

Margaret Richardson, licensing foster care worker for Cass County's FIA, explained how the system works: The children must go through a process, with the goal being to reunite them with their natural families. There is a one-year window in which to accomplish this, Richardson said. If this is not possible, then proceedings to terminate parental rights are started.

After that process clears the system, the children are free to be adopted. "In Cass County, a lot the of kids in the foster care program are adopted," Richardson said. "A lot are adopted by relatives."

Richardson said anyone interested in becoming a foster parent can call her at 445-0285.

A large reception was given in the probate/family section of the new Law and Courts building after all the papers were signed and the adoption proceedings legally completed.